

AN INSTRUMENT PANEL SYSTEM HAVING CONCEALED SWITCHES

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to instrument panel systems having a plurality of switches for use by an occupant in a passenger compartment which are visible to the occupant only when illuminated by an illumination source.

2. Background Art

An instrument panel includes a number of switches. In the automotive industry, and in others, the styling of the instrument panel is important to achieving an aesthetically appealing instrument panel.

The switches play an important role in the aesthetic desirability of the instrument panel's appearance. The switches, however, typically include a relief, a bezel, a bracket, or some other fixture or protrusion which tends to interrupt the smoothness of the instrument panel. The interruption is aesthetically undesirable.

The openings required for the switches in the instrument panel also tend to be aesthetically undesirable. Many instrument panels are manufactured from a common instrument panel architecture which standardizes the openings in the instrument panel used to accommodate the switches. Because some of the openings in such standardized instrument panels are not always used, the openings must be filled with blanks or plugs. This is also aesthetically undesirable.

Accordingly, there exists a need to provide a more aesthetically appealing instrument panel.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides an aesthetically appealing instrument panel by including a number of switches which are visible only when illuminated by an illumination source. The switches are thus generally concealed such that an area proximate the switch on a surface of the instrument panel appears to be uninterrupted by the switch.

The switch can be a membrane switch which requires a mechanical contact to actuate the switch. Preferably, the membrane switch includes an outer substrate that matches with the surface material of the instrument panel. The outer substrate is positioned flush with the instrument panel surface to conceal the switch by providing a substantially uninterrupted appearance.

The switch can also be a field effect switch which is actuated by disrupting an electric field. The field effect can be mounted behind the instrument panel to conceal the switch. Even though the field effect switch is behind the instrument panel, the electric field travels through the instrument panel to permit disruption and actuation.

The switches can also comprise part of a control panel. The control panel can include a plurality of the switches for attachment to the instrument panel. Once attached to the instrument panel, the switches can be used by an occupant in a passenger compartment to control features a vehicle or other controllable systems.

An illumination source is provided for selectively illuminating the switches. The switches are only visible to the occupant when illuminated by the illumination source. In this manner, the switches (membrane or field effect) are substantially hidden from the occupant unless illuminated. This provides an aesthetically appealing instrument pane.

The illumination source can be one or more illuminable icons. The illuminable icons can be part of a material substrate in the switch, such as a light

emitting diode provided behind the icon and illuminated to illuminate the icon. A single switch can include multiple icons and multiple light emitting diodes to separately illuminate each icon.

The illumination source can also be a projector for projecting light onto 5 the switches. The projected light can originate from a position in front of or behind the instrument panel. In either case, the light is projected onto or through to an outer surface of the instrument panel to selectively illuminate the switches. The projector can also project an additional image onto the surface of the instrument panel, preferably the additional image can act as a display for conveying information to the 10 occupant.

The instrument panel system can further include a control module in communication with the control panel and the instrument panel for selectively interfacing the control panel with one or more vehicles systems to be controlled by the actuation of the switches. Preferably, the control module controls the illumination 15 source to selectively illuminate the switches. For example, an actuation area that the user presses to actuate the switch can be increased by the control module assigning more than one switch to a single illumination source. Also, the control module can switch the illumination source functions such that the same switch can be used for multiple purposes.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGURE 1 illustrates an instrument panel system having switches which are visible only when illuminated by an illumination source in accordance with the present invention;

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FIGURE 2 illustrates an unilluminated switch in accordance with the

present invention;

FIGURE 3 illustrates an illuminated radio switch in accordance with the present invention;

FIGURE 4 illustrates an illuminated CD player switch in accordance with the present invention;

5 FIGURE 5 illustrates a field effect switch in accordance with the present invention;

FIGURE 6 illustrates a membrane switch in accordance with the present invention;

10 FIGURE 7 illustrates an instrument panel system panel system having a projector for projecting light onto a plurality of switches in accordance with the present invention; and

FIGURE 8 illustrates the projector providing a display having an image portion and a switch portion in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT(S)

15 FIGURE 1 illustrates an instrument panel system 10. The instrument panel system includes an instrument panel 14, a number of switches 16, a control module 20, a radio and compact disc player unit 22, an air control unit 26 and an array 28 of switches 16.

20 Each switch 16 includes a display 18. The switches 16 and displays 18 are shown in phantom to illustrate each is concealed from view unless illuminated. In this manner, the instrument panel 14 appears to be relatively uninterrupted by the switches 16. This provides a smooth and aesthetically pleasing instrument panel system 10.

The instrument panel system 10 shown relates to an automobile, however, the present invention is not limited to automobiles. The present invention applies to airplanes, boats, and other vehicles.

FIGURES 2-4 illustrate the operation of the switches 16. In 5 particular, the figures provided an example how the control module 20 can control the use of the same switch 16 to provide a radio icon and a CD player icon for use with separate controls of the radio and CD unit 22.

In detail, Figure 2 illustrates the display 18 as it appears to the 10 passenger area when unilluminated. As shown, the switch 16 and the icon are concealed from view. Figure 3 illustrates the display 18 if a radio icon is illuminated to select a radio station associated with number "1" button. Figure 4 illustrates the illumination source if a CD icon is illuminated to select playing of a CD.

In this manner, various displays 18 are provided by the switches 16 15 around the radio and CD unit 22, similarly switches 16 can be provided around the air control unit 26. The displays 18 correspond with the available functions of the respective units 22, 26. Similarly, the array 26 of switches 16 can include any number of displays 18.

FIGURE 5 illustrates the switch 16 comprising a field effect switch 30. 20 The field effect switch 30 can provide the illumination sources shown in Figures 2-4. As shown in Figure 1, a number of the field effect switches can comprises a control panel 40. The control panel 40 can then be attached to instrument panel and provided to be in communication with the radio and compact disc player unit 22.

25 The field effect switch 30 includes a support layer 34, a circuit board 36, and a touch cell 38 and can be actuated by disrupting an electric field produced by the touch cell 38. The disruption occurs by a user placing their finger relative

to the electric field. The disruption is then interpreted by electronics on the circuit board 36.

5 The circuit board 36 communicates an actuation signal to the control module 20 if the disruption is sufficient for actuation. Typically, the period of disruption, the intensity, and the frequency are factors in determining whether the disruption is sufficient for actuation and whether the user desired to actuate the switch 30.

10 The display 18 is provided by an illumination source 42, 44 illuminating the switch 16. The illumination sources 42, 44 can be light emitting diodes. The display 18 is an image shown through to a surface 46 of the instrument panel 14 from light created by the light emitting diodes 42, 44.

15 The display 18 is needed to reveal the concealed switch 30 so that the user can locate and actuate the switch 30. Unless the switch 30 is illuminated, it is otherwise concealed from the user such that the switch 30 is viewed when the display is illuminated and concealed when the display is unilluminated.

20 The display 18 can comprise one or more illuminable icons images 48, 50. The illuminable icons images 48, 50 are images provide by icons 54, 56 in part of the support substrate 34. The light emitting diodes 42, 44 are provided behind each icon 54, 56 to illuminate the icon images 48, 50. As shown, one switch 30 can include multiple icons 54, 56 and multiple light emitting diodes 42, 44 to separately illuminate each icon image 48, 50.

25 The images provided by the support substrate 34 are transferred through the instrument panel 14 for display to the passenger compartment. The instrument panel 14 portion proximate the display 18 is a material suitable to pass light from the light emitting diodes 42, 44 to the passenger area while also concealing the icons 54, 56 when unilluminated.

The control module 20 controls which icon 54, 56 and which switch 18 is illuminated. In this manner, the control module 20 can vary the display 18 and the function indicated by the display 18, as shown in Figures 2-4. In addition, the control module 20 is provided to be in communication with the switches 16 which 5 are arranged together to form the control panel 40 and the illumination source 42, 44 to selectively interface the control panel 40 with a vehicle system to be controlled by the switch 16. The control module 20 can thus selectively control illumination of the illumination source 42, 44 based on the vehicle system to be controlled.

10 Optionally, the field effect switch 30 can include a tone generator 70 and a tactile feel generator 74. One or both of these devices can be used as an actuation notification. The actuation notification is helpful to confirm that the switch was actuated.

15 The tone generator 70 is used to signal actuation of the switch 18 with an audible signal. The tactile feel generator 74 is used to signal actuation of the switch with a vibration or other signal which the user can feel.

A standoff 78 and a solenoid control circuit 80 can be included to facilitate operation of the tactile feel generator 74. The solenoid control circuit 80 controls the intensity and duration of the tactile feel signal and the standoff 78 is used to support the tactile feel generator away from the support layer.

20 FIGURE 6 illustrates the switch 16 comprising a membrane switch 90. The membrane switch 90 is concealed by its smooth fit to the instrument panel 14. The membrane switch 90 includes an outer substrate 92, a support substrate 96, a circuit board 98, a wire 100 connecting the outer substrate 92 to the circuit board 98, and a wire opening 104.

25 The outer substrate 92 is positioned flush with the instrument panel 14 to conceal the switch 90. The flush positioning provides a relatively smooth and uninterrupted fit between the instrument panel and the switch 90. In this manner,

the aesthetic appearance of the instrument panel 12 is not negatively affected by the switch 10.

5 Slight grooves 108 may be seen upon close inspection. The grooves 108 can result from tolerancing differences between the switch 90 and in the relief in the instrument panel 14 required to accommodate the outer substrate 92. However, the grooves 108 are uninterrupted to the instrument panel 12 from an aesthetic point of view. In particular, the grooves 108 are aesthetically acceptable relative to the use of a relief, a bezel, a bracket, or some other fixture or protrusion which negatively interrupts the smoothness of the instrument panel.

10 The outer substrate 92 preferably matches the instrument panel 14 proximate the switch 90. This further increases the aesthetic appeal of the membrane switch 90. The outer substrate 92 material need not always match the instrument panel 14.

15 The membrane switch 90 is actuated by pressing against the outer substrate 92. This produces a change in the outer substrate 92 which induces a voltage change. The voltage change is registered by the circuit board 98 as actuation of the switch. Rather than inducing a voltage change, however, the switch 90 could include a push-button or other actuation means.

20 The membrane switch 90 includes the display 18 which operates in the same manner as described above with respect to the field effect switch and shown in Figures 2-4. In other words, the display 18 is illuminate by light emitting diodes 122, 124 to reveal the concealed membrane switch 90 so that the user can locate and actuate the switch 90. Unless the switch 90 is illuminated, it is otherwise concealed from the user such that the switch is viewed when the display is 25 illuminated and concealed when the display is unilluminated.

Similarly, the display 18 can comprise one or more illuminable icon images 114, 116. The illuminable icon 118, 120 are part of the support substrate 96. The light emitting diodes 122, 124 are provide behind each icon 118, 120 to

illuminate the icon images 114, 116. As shown, one switch can include multiple icons 118, 120 and multiple light emitting diodes 122, 124 to separately illuminate each icon 114, 116.

5 The display 18 provided by the membrane switch 90 is transferred through the instrument panel 14 and the outer substrate 92 for display to the passenger area. The instrument panel portion 14 and the outer substrate 92, therefore, are both materials suitable to pass light from the LED to the passenger area while also concealing the icon when unilluminated. This type of material is commonly referred to as a one-way light transmissible material.

10 The membrane switch 90 can also include a tone generator 130, a tactile feel generator 132, a standoff 136, and a solenoid control circuit 138. In addition, the control module controls which icon and which membrane switch 90 is illuminated. In this manner, the control module 20 can vary the display and the function corresponding with the display.

15 FIGURE 7 illustrates an instrument panel system 150. Like the instrument panel system 10 shown in Figure 1, the instrument panel system includes an instrument panel 152, a control panel 154 having one or more concealed switches 156, a display 158 for each switch 156 a control module 160, a radio and CD player unit 162, an air control unit 164, and an array 168 of switches 156. In addition, the 20 instrument panel system includes a projector 172 as an illumination source positioned in front of the instrument panel.

25 The projector 172 is used for projecting light onto a surface of the instrument panel 152 to selectively illuminate the plurality of switches 156 by providing the displays 158. The switches can comprise either one or both of the field effect switch 30 and the membrane switch 90. The user actuates the switches 156 as described above.

 The difference in instrument panel system 150 is that the displays 158 indicating the operation for the switches are 156 from the projector 172 and not the

switch. Generally, the LEDs and icons are removed from the switches if the projector is used, but they need not be removed. In some cases, it may desirable to utilize the icons in combination with the projector to provide additional functionality and designability.

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The projector 172 can project virtually any type of display onto the switches 156. It can produce display images similar to those provided by the icons or others. In addition, the size of the display 158 can be increased to cover multiple switches by simply adjusting the size of the projected display. This allows the 10 control module 160 to adjust the size of the switch 156 perceived by the user without requiring hardware changes. For example, multiple switches in the array 168 can receive portions of the same display 158 to increase the size of the display from the user perspective.

As shown in FIGURE 8, the projector 172 can also be configured to 15 provide an additional display 174 having an image portion 176 and a switch portion 178. In this manner information can be conveyed to the occupant, such as with a moving image or a global positioning image. In addition, the projector 172 is provided to be in communication with the control module 160 such that the projected light can be used to selectively illuminate the various switches 156 based 20 on the vehicle system to be controlled.

The control module can also assign each switch 156 in the switch display portion 178 a function based on the images provided in the image portion. The available functions are shown by the displays 158 and could include adjusting contrast, positioning, or data entry relative to the video or global positioning image. 25 The data entry could be achieved with the switch portion of the display providing an alphanumeric display. Alternatively, various icons could be displayed in the image portion to indicate available functions.

The variability of the projector is advantageous from a stylistic and design perspective as both the design and user can tailor the display to their needs 30 without requiring hardware changes to the instrument panel. The use of the

concealed switches is especially advantageous in that the non-used switches are concealed. This eliminates the problem of having to fill the openings with aesthetically undesirable blanks or plugs.

5 Alternatively, the projector could be positioned behind the instrument panel 152. The projected displays 158 would then have to travel through the switches 156 as described above. The switches include transparent or translucent portions, and in combination with light guides if necessary, which permit the projected image to pass through. The material of the instrument panel and the outer
10 substrate of the membrane switch must also be selected to permit the image to be displayed while concealing the switch, as described above. The switch may include some opaque or non-transparent portions through which the image cannot pass. In compensation, the switches are arranged accordingly and the available display sizes and positioning are similarly limited.

15 While embodiments of the invention have been illustrated and described, it is not intended that these embodiments illustrate and describe all possible forms of the invention. Rather, the words used in the specification are words of description rather than limitation, and it is understood that various changes may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.